

VU Research Portal

Ecclesia sine macula et ruga

Füsti Molnár, A.S.

2008

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Füsti Molnár, A. S. (2008). *Ecclesia sine macula et ruga: Donatist Factors among the Ecclesiological Challenges for the Reformed Church of Hungary especially after 1989/90*. [PhD-Thesis – Research external, graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam].

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

Summary

Ecclesia sine macula et ruga

Donatist Factors among the Ecclesiological Challenges
for the Reformed Church of Hungary especially after 1989/90

Attention to the supernatural is necessary because its focus is on more than life in the world and on more than mere consciousness - it is the Spirit's way of opening us to Eternity. Since full existence consists of more than our daily reasoning and actions, we need to be connected to a wider and higher reality, namely, that of our Lord, to whom we belong and from whom our strength springs. This strength surrounds us and invigorates us. My life as a congregation member of the Reformed Church of Hungary and as a pastor and teacher has been enriched by many different experiences of the church. Some of these experiences seem to be those of decay, sickness, and a mere silhouette of real life, unless we remember the ways of the One and only God and his saving interaction with the reality he created. All too often the church seems to consist of souls behind walls without much of a view, but then we must remember the beam of light sent by God through Jesus Christ as a sign of new life and hope, so that we can fulfil our mission by following Christ. Perhaps these thoughts of mine do not differ much from those found in the wider context of Christianity.

In the wider context of Christianity, throughout the changes of time, the different practices, beliefs, theology and cultures all contributed immensely to the diversity of the church. One of the constant concomitant features of ecclesial existence is that the church is understood as '*in via*' until its eschatological fulfilment. The history of the Christian Church provides countless examples of this '*in via*', as when rigid uniformity has given way to a rich diversity, or when isolation yields to an experience of unity - or indeed vice versa. In the course of historical events the year 1989/90 was an intense time of change for Hungarian society, with a number of internal and external challenges; also for the Reformed Church of Hungary. After four decades of Communism, democratic changes began in Hungary, where the Reformed Church found itself in a new, although very ambivalent situation. One of the key issues at that time was whether the Reformed Church of Hungary was ready to face the heretical status of its recent four decades (1948-89).

We must confess that we only comprehend fragmentally (1 Corinthians 13: 9) God's ultimate concern for the church in Jesus Christ, but it seems appropriate to take as our point of departure the description of the church in the letter to the Ephesians (5:27): 'the church without spot and wrinkle' (*Ecclesia sine macula et ruga*). In the present thesis' voyage of discovery in the ecclesiology of the Reformed Church of Hungary after 1989/90, the organising paradigm is the Donatist movement's theological elements in the fourth century and their relevance to the situation today. We believe that the analogies in relation to this first notable church dissent in many ways give us a useful guidance to the Hungarian situation; they provide a broader view for analysis and for evaluation and help us take some historical distance.

Donatism, as a schismatic movement, originated after the *Great Persecution* (303-305) of Emperor Diocletian and continued in North Africa until the overwhelming of the whole region by the Muslim invasions of the seventh century. A number of complicated issues emerged during the long history of the Donatist movement, in polemic with the Catholic Church. We believe that in fourth century North West Africa some extreme variations of possible theological answers determined church history and is influential until the present days. The complex nature of the issues raised by the Donatists is very clear from the pastoral, polemical and other theological writings of Augustine. Basic theological issues were at stake, which reveal the nature of and perspectives on the church, and its situation in the world when a hostile environment and even persecution are present. Major ecclesiological themes are present in this Donatist debate, which try to define the essence of the Christian Church according to its holiness and catholicity, as the body of Christ on both a universal and local level. The major issue of the debate can be compacted in one short question: *Ubi ecclesia?* - which from time to time has reappeared in the life of the Christian church, paving the road of ecclesiological challenges. Therefore we believe that Donatism is not only a specific past movement which belongs to church history, but also its theological elements can be viewed as an impetus that can come alive in any ambiguous ecclesiastical situation, especially after persecution of the church. For at such a time the church is challenged to cope with its own past in order to find God's will in the present and hopefully for the future. We sum up our understanding of Donatism in a generalized form by using the expression: 'Donatist Factors', by which we mean those elements which make up the Donatist identity. These elements are explained toward the end of the second chapter. We also have to note that the complex number of elements in the Donatist movement are not always present in the same composition in various ecclesiological problems. But as the history of Donatism shows, they could cause a split among the Donatists themselves, just as well as that they could lead the Catholic theologians to modify their thoughts in relation to these factors. We believe that by going deeper into

the Donatist problem one can find many surprising elements, which will warn us to not take sides too quickly in this kind of dissent. The trends and major characteristic elements have never disappeared from the life of the Church. The issues raised during the Donatist-Catholic debates also have relevance for the ecclesiological situation of the Reformed Church of Hungary today. These issues touch fundamental teachings on ecclesiology, Christology, mission, and on a theology of reconciliation.

The research method of the study is from an historical perspective and also takes into account the social-political and cultural dimensions, although the main line of thought will stay in the area of systematic theology, especially ecclesiology. The primary aim of this analysis of the past in relation to the present is to point out partial parallels and some actual consequences in relation to the theological existence of the Reformed Church of Hungary. Some of the main theological problems of the Donatist dissent provide a focus for the research. The research is based on primary and secondary sources in relation to the Hungarian situation, and mainly on secondary sources (from the past and from the current debate) for the Donatist part.

The Donatist Factors in ecclesiology can be pictured in the constellation of the following themes.

1) The persecution of Christians (or others) leads to a crucial question, which every religious community has to face. Is faith best expressed through confrontation or through compromise with hostile secular powers? Should believers choose paths of valour and even martyrdom, or paths of accommodation and discretion? One also has to take into consideration a theology of penance and the possible ways for development after persecution.

2) Holiness and separation in the church. Considering the holiness and unity of the church or denomination: What role do Christology and Eschatology have? *Unity* is contrasted with two concepts that stand on either side of it: *uniformity* and *cooperation*. Uniformity is to deny individuality and the uniqueness of personality. Cooperation is a limited degree of unity, from which the parties can more easily withdraw. How is real unity best understood? What role does tradition have in these questions? What role does diversity play in maintaining unity? How can the church remain part of the one body of Christ, and be the spiritual home for the indigenous people of a particular place? Can conflict be a key element for understanding the nature of the church? The question of church leadership is crucial in these matters.

3) Church and state, and church and society. How does the church as the body of Christ relate to society? How does ministry deal with the collective evil present in the world? What is the task of Christians in different kinds of society? Does the church have the aim of transforming society or does it rather offer an alternative society? Can the church make the sick world well? How does Christian self-identity help the church truly be the church, while the members of the church are also members of the state?

4) What role can ethnicity play in ecclesiology, especially in the context of foreign imperial dominion? How is one's national identity interrelated with one's Christian identity in the church?

These themes, as structural parts of the Donatist struggle with the Catholics, help guide us in the case of the situation of the Reformed Church of Hungary since the fall of Communism in 1989-90 and afterwards.

The specific research question of the study can be articulated as follows:

How do the issues raised in the Donatist-Catholic debate help clarify the ecclesiological situation of the Reformed Church of Hungary after the downfall of Communism?

The structure of the study can be outlined as follows:

1) After the introduction in chapter one, in chapter two we introduce Donatism (*The Donatist Dissent as a Sign-post in Ecclesiology*), taking into account its main tendencies and the historical and sociological context of the movement. We also find it important to include those scholarly treatments - mainly from the second half of the twentieth century - which reveal another side of Donatism. After an evaluation of the different issues raised in the debates which were set in the context of general ecclesial views from Tertullian through Cyprian, the Donatist, until Augustine, we then make an attempt to highlight the most characteristic elements (called: *Donatist Factors*), which will guide us in the analysis of the Hungarian Church's ecclesiological situation.

2) In chapter three (*Historical Lines of the Reformed Church in Hungary from the Reformation to the Twentieth Century*), we shortly describe the major historical lines (from the sixteenth to the first half of the twentieth century) of the Reformed Church of Hungary in relation to our special focus.

3) In chapter four (*Introduction to the History and the 'Official' Theology of the Hungarian Reformed Church Between 1945-1990*) we elaborate the recent past of the Reformed Church of Hungary during the time of Communism, taking into account the historical, political, socio-cultural and theological stances of the official church-leadership.

4) In chapter five (*Overview of the Ecclesiological Context of the Reformed Church of Hungary after the Downfall of Communism*), we give a general overview and analysis of the ecclesiological context of the Reformed Church of Hungary after Communism, concentrating on the years 1990-2000, in relation to the political, socio-cultural and theological areas.

5) In chapter six (*Una Sancta Catholica et Apostolica – Ecclesia sine Macula et Ruga*), we analyse how the *Donatist Factors* can help us understand the challenges of the Reformed Church of Hungary, especially after the time of 1989/90. The main systematic task can be found in this final chapter where we bring together an ecclesial, historical-systematic conclusion concerning the Donatist movement within the different theological positions of the Hungarian Reformed Church after 1989, taking into account the similarities and differences with Donatism.

According to the above mentioned structure of the thesis we can shortly summarise the results as follows: 1) our analysis of the *Donatist Factors* may result in a crucial role for Hungarian ecclesiological approaches after 1989, especially by calling attention to the following aspects we have learned through this study; 2) the importance of the self-identification of the church became evident in relation to its essence, which always should determine its empirical existence; 2) awareness that the historical situation requires concrete confession about the certainty of faith and about the essence of the church - otherwise the church's true reality is endangered; 3) the need of consensus on the central content of the Gospel.

In light of the last chapter's major themes (unity, sanctity, and ethnicity along with the socio-political issues) we come to the following conclusions in regard to the ecclesiological challenges for the Reformed Church of Hungary.

1) The *unity* of the Reformed Church of Hungary faces a challenge in relation to understanding and maintaining its unity. The ecclesiological deformation in Communism left its marks on the church after the changes of 1989; therefore the theoretical and practical *orientation* of the church was often misplaced.

2) The *holiness* of the church in light of its opposition to heresy and sin is also always fragile. Holiness is expressed in the church by its teaching, by the lives of the members, by means of the sacraments and in the liturgy. These phenomena are regarded as holy because they have their origin in God. Some of the tendencies of the present ecclesiastical situation of the Reformed Church of Hungary create a challenge concerning the question of its sanctity, and this problem finds its origin in the negative ecclesiological models inherited from the recent past. One of the biggest challenges arose from the unstable ecclesiological views after the changes in relation to the question of collaborators. The large number of social agendas of the church after the changes has been isolated from the *message of reconciliation*. Among the great number of events during these changes one of the leading features was the radical *injustice* in relation to the past as well as in the new circumstances. Therefore the matter of *justice* seemed to win a primary focus in the church, instead of God's grace. This way justice and liberation seemed to be pre-requirements for reconciliation. This resulted in the thought that since justice is not yet available in a sufficient way, the message of reconciliation also seems out of reach. One could also mention the tension between the secularisation and the sacralisation of the church, which creates another challenge in the Hungarian situation, and this vividly brings forward the problems of church membership and church discipline.

3) The question of *ethnicity* is strongly connected to the identity crisis of the post-modern age. The new emphasis on identity and the search for openness and dialogue in an increasingly secular way can also be seen as a part of globalization. This tendency in the meantime is challenged by a new quest for cultural, national, ethnic, confessional and also personal identity. The challenges occur in regard to responsibility in the Hungarian situation after the changes of 1989/90, circling around the question of how to avoid extremes in these matters and find workable biblical messages for these issues. The inheritance of Communism, which is highly connected to the *brain washing* of that time, has harmed the Hungarian self-awareness and has accelerated the identity crisis, and in this way also strengthens some radical enforcements of nationality which are also present in the life of the church. A realisation of a Christian identity for individuals and also in a corporative sense can balance the ethnic and socio-political perspective in such a way that the national identity receives advantages also.

This short summary of the conclusion of the thesis calls attention to some important aspects in the analogy between the Donatist Factors ecclesiological sources and the situation of the Reformed Church of Hungary after the changes of 1989. According to our analysis the tendencies similar to the Donatist pattern have been growing. Therefore, acknowledgment of the Donatist Factors is important in order to avoid the possible extremes which might push any solution in the direction of a radical separation in the church. Neglecting the important insights of the Donatist Factors for today would also create a problem – and this has not yet been sufficiently realised.